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FM AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5103  
INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5057  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0930  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 5733  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 5427  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 3743  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1062  
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU PRIORITY 0344  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 3194  
RHMFISS/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY  
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1528  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2457

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000447

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2017

TAGS: PREF PREL PGOV CH BT NP

SUBJECT: NEPAL: NO OBJECTION TO RESETTLEMENT OF BHUTANESE

REFUGEES

REF: KATHMANDU 317

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty for reasons 1.4(b/d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) In separate meetings on February 26, the Ambassador briefed Foreign Minister K.P. Oli and Home Minister K.P. Sitaula on Prime Minister Koirala's February 7 approval of U.S. plans to resettle Bhutanese refugees (reftel). Both ministers were noncommittal, but raised no objections to the U.S. plan. The Ambassador also reiterated the long-standing U.S. request that Nepal allow Tibetans with U.S. immigration benefits to depart. The Foreign Minister indicated that no movement on Tibetan refugees would occur until after Bhutanese refugee resettlement began. The Home Minister, on the other hand, appeared more willing to allow small groups of Tibetan following-to-join cases to depart for the U.S. The Ambassador also asked both Ministers to expedite the departure of approximately 50 urban refugees that the U.S. had approved for resettlement.

Bringing the Foreign and Home Ministers Up To Speed

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¶2. (C) In separate meetings with the Foreign and Home Ministers on February 26, the Ambassador recapped his February 7 meeting with Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala at which the PM approved third-country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees. He informed the ministers that the U.S. intended to move ahead with resettlement plans on that basis.

The Ambassador also provided both ministers with copies of PRM Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey's letter to the Prime Minister as well as the U.S. resettlement fact sheet. He explained that identifying an implementing partner and setting up a processing office for resettlement would take two months or more and agreed that no public announcements would be made for some weeks yet. However, the Ambassador noted, recent security problems in the Sanischere camp between refugees and local Nepalese highlighted the need to move forward quickly with resolving the Bhutanese refugee issue.

Possible Nepal-Bhutan Meeting in late March

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¶13. (C) Foreign Minister Oli replied that he first wanted to conclude one more meeting with the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) before beginning a large-scale resettlement program. FM Oli objected to the RGOB's perceived disinterest in resolving the refugee situation, questioning how Bhutan could honestly democratize without resolving the lives of nearly 20 percent of its population. Oli reiterated Nepal's position that the refugee issue was one between the RGOB and its people, not Nepal, which he said had drawn criticism from Prime Minister Wangchuk. Still recovering from his illness, Oli said he would return to Bangkok for a medical checkup on March 12, after which he might visit Thimpu to meet with his RGOB counterpart.

Home Minister On Board

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¶14. (C) Home Minister Sitaula appeared to accept the proposed U.S. plan and asked whether donor countries would be able to resettle the entire refugee population. The Ambassador replied that between the U.S., Canada and Australia, the vast majority of refugees could be resettled, but not all. Some refugees might be easily integrated locally due to family ties in Nepal, he added. The Ambassador looked forward to working with the Home Ministry on procedural issues related to a large-scale resettlement program.

Maoists Do Not Support Third-Country Resettlement

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¶15. (C) FM Oli commented that the Maoists did not support third-country resettlement. That was precisely why we would like to move now, the Ambassador said, to remove the possibility that the Maoists could block a comprehensive solution. Oli feared that if he were to move forward with a Bhutanese refugee resettlement program, the Maoists might attempt to reverse the program after entering an interim government, particularly if Oli did not retain his Cabinet seat. The Ambassador acknowledged this risk, but believed the Bhutanese refugees were not a priority issue for the Maoists, who were more concerned about positioning themselves for the upcoming elections.

No Traction on Tibetan Asylees

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¶16. (C) The Ambassador again raised the long-standing U.S. request that the Government of Nepal (GON) allow roughly 180 Tibetan asylees with U.S. immigration benefits to depart Nepal and join their families in the U.S. FM Oli was reluctant to tackle two refugee issues at one time, opining that Nepal's movement to resolve the Bhutanese refugee issue would upset the Indians while allowing Tibetan resettlement would anger the Chinese. (Comment. Despite Oli's concerns, Indian Ambassador Mukherjee seemed pleased that a comprehensive solution for the Bhutanese refugees was on the horizon. End Comment.) Sitaula, however, appeared more willing to consider this issue, suggesting that small groups of the Tibetan asylees might be allowed to depart Nepal at a time.

Home Ministry Opposes Designation of Urban Refugees

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¶17. (C) The Ambassador requested the GON to allow roughly 50 urban refugees whom the U.S. had approved for resettlement to depart Nepal. Both ministers appeared unfamiliar with the issue, but Home Secretary Mainali, who was present for the Ambassador's meeting with Sitaula, replied that the GON had serious reservations about the way UNHCR had identified these

individuals as refugees without properly informing the Home Ministry. "Nepal does not want to be a magnet for refugees," Mainali added. The Ambassador explained that the group comprised Pakistani, Iraqi and Somali refugees and questioned the GON interest in keeping them in Nepal. (Note. The U.S. approved this group of refugees for resettlement in December 2006, but so far the GON has refused to issue them exit permits. In earlier meetings, Home Ministry officials had indicated that Nepal did not want UNHCR to process any urban refugees whatsoever. End Note.) In an aside to Mainali, Sitaula asked what these urban refugees were doing in Nepal and said "let's send them."

Comment

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18. (C) Having recently returned to work after a prolonged illness, FM Oli seemed unaware of the Prime Minister's decision to proceed with third-country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees. Oli himself admitted that he had not spoken much with the Prime Minister in recent weeks, other than short conversations about the peace process. Oli also seemed to think that he might not be part of an interim government. However, neither Oli nor Sitaula raised objections to U.S. resettlement plans. On Tibetan refugees, the primary obstacle appears to be from within the Foreign, not Home, Ministry. We will continue to push for their departure of the Tibetans. The delayed departure of urban refugees to the U.S. appears largely to be a bureaucratic, not political, obstacle that we hope can be overcome in the near future.

MORIARTY